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## The Pursuit of Civic Engagement: Youth Civic Engagement and the Role of Higher Education

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## The Pursuit of Civic Engagement: Youth Civic Engagement and the Role of Higher Education

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### Abstract

*Putnam (2000) argues that, in recent years, there has been a steady decline of social capital and civic engagement in western societies. However, arguments claiming a 'crisis' of civic engagement have also been met with fierce academic disagreement, leading to a strongly contested debate as to whether civic engagement is in decline or simply evolving. Using a mixed methods approach, this research sought to explore youth civic engagement among the students of the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown aged 18 to 25. Preliminary quantitative results provide evidence of both disengagement with traditional routes and a re-routing of engagement towards more lifestyle orientated, personal engagement. Preliminary qualitative results provide further insight into the possible barriers motivating young people to find alternative routes of civic expression. In light of these results and the national strategic priority of higher education in the promotion of civic engagement, this paper makes some recommendations for consideration in the development of the new Technological University for Dublin.*

**Key Words:** Youth civic engagement, higher education, community-based research, ethical reasoning, democracy plaza.

### Introduction

Putnam (1995, 2000) has noted that levels of civic engagement in the United States have been steadily declining since the 1960s. This proclamation gained unprecedented attention, raising national and international concerns in most Western Democracies and leading to a wave of research initiatives attempting either to measure or define civic engagement, to investigate, explain or oppose its 'decline' or to propose how these trends might be prevented (Banjai 2008, p.543). However, what has emerged is a lack of clarity on what is civic engagement. Saltmarch (2005, p.52) notes that at the majority of gatherings relating to furthering civic engagement it is not long before questions arise about what is actually meant by civic engagement. There is widespread acknowledgement that there are formidable challenges with respect to defining the term 'civic engagement' (Jacoby 2009, p.5). According to Bennett and Wells (2009, p.1) debates surrounding the term 'civic engagement' highlight 'fundamental epistemological conflicts over what counts as civic and what counts as engagement in various settings, from games to encounters with news'. This inevitably led to lack of clarity as to what 'civic engagement' is and how best to promote it (Berger 2009, Jacoby 2009).

Nevertheless, the promotion of civic engagement is now currently a high priority in higher education, both nationally and internationally. The National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 (DES 2011, p.77) highlights the need for higher education institutes to renew their commitment to their civic mission. Although this strategy recognises the current efforts of higher institutions in relation to their civic mission, it stresses that more work needs to be done (DES 2011, p.80). In light of this, in 2014 the majority of higher education institutes signed the Campus Engage (2014) charter 'to underscore their

commitment to the civic and community engagement role and responsibilities of their institutions'. Whilst acknowledging the challenge that encouraging civic purpose poses within the higher education sector globally, there is also the opportunity at this juncture for implementation of a strong civic engagement agenda as the new Technological University is being established. As highlighted by Jacobs (2009, p.5) it is important to acknowledge that the term 'civic engagement' can be applied to both individuals and to institutions. Therefore, it is important to state that the focus of this paper is the education of students for civic engagement.

## **Background to the study**

### **Youth Civic Engagement**

The debate surrounding the apparent civic disengagement of young people is highly congested. However, most academics appear to agree that young people are disengaging from most traditional forms of civic engagement, such as voting, volunteering, keeping informed about public affairs and politics (Bennet 2008, Pritzker 2008, Sherrod, Flanagan and Youniss 2002, Norris 2002). Youth disengagement and dissatisfaction with traditional political and civic processes is evident in both the United States and Europe and when it comes to traditional indicators of civic engagement, young people have the lowest turnout. However, research is providing evidence of alternative patterns in youth civic behaviour, mainly in more personal or lifestyle related politics, such as political consumerism, boycotting, charity donations and online activism (Stolle and Hooghe 2005, Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and DelliCarpini 2006, Bennett 2008). However, disagreements between academics begin when advocates for traditional forms of engagement discount evidence of new, evolving forms of youth participation as not desirable (Friendland cited in MacArthur 2006, Carpini cited in MacArthur 2006, Bennett and Wells 2009). This gives rise to the 'two paradigm' dialectic with respect to youth civic engagement, with opponents subscribing either to the disengaged paradigm or to the engaged paradigm (Bennett 2008, Dalton 2008). In light of the above, the primary purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of young people's civic engagement patterns in modern society.

### **Method**

The first stage of this research project aimed to gather quantitative data on the levels of civic engagement of students aged between 18 and 25 attending the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown.

**Survey Design.** The survey contained a total of 68 variables that measured eight different categories as follows: F1 Citizenship Norms, F2 Electoral Indicators, F3 Public Voice Indicators, F4 Civic Indicators, F5 Attentiveness to Political/Current Affairs, F6 Lifestyle Politics F7 Government and Trust and F8 Online Engagement. The survey was distributed physically to students attending the institute in May 2014. A total of 200 surveys were distributed and of these, 162 surveys fit the age criteria for this research project (18-25).

**Students.** Of the 162 respondents who fit the age criteria and completed the surveys, 58% (n=94) were males and 42% (n=68) were female. The age

criteria for respondents ranged from 18 to 25 years old, and the respondents' ages were relatively equally weighted in each age category, therefore no one age was over-represented. There was a concentration of respondents from three main courses; these were Business at (30%), Social Care at (18%) and Sports Management at (15%). The remaining courses were slightly less represented with Engineering (12%), Creative Digital Media (7%), Horticulture (5%) and Social and Community Development at (4%), followed lastly with Early Childcare and Education (1%).

**Limitations of the Study.** It is important to highlight here that this once-off survey provides a snapshot of the civic engagement and disengagement behaviours of a specific group, i.e. students aged 18 to 25, at a specific point in time.

### **Results**

**Citizenship Norms.** Respondents were presented with a list of eight different citizenship norms. They were then asked on a scale from one to ten, how important they believe it is for a person to engage with each. According to Dalton (2008), the norms of citizenship will predict the behaviours of citizens. While the students in this sample found most of the norms of citizenship important, there is one norm which they do not consider a relevant citizenship norm for being a 'good citizen' and that is 'being involved in politics' (M=3.93).

**Electoral Indicators.** The electoral indicators specifically pertain to behaviours of citizens around the times of elections and referenda; their political behaviour. A total of 65% of participants stated that they were registered to vote. Of the overall sample (N=162), only 32% of respondents stated that they 'Always' vote, or alternately of those who are registered to vote, 55% 'Always' vote. When asked if they intend on voting in the upcoming European Election (23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2014), 46% of respondents stated that they do intend on voting. Also 26% of respondents stated that they have deliberately not voted due to frustration, anger or confusion during the campaign or with the political process.

**Civic Indictors.** Civic indicators pertain to the social behaviours and activities people engage in within their community or wider society, from volunteering to group or club memberships (Zurkin et al 2006). The highest rate of civic engagement is less 'traditional' civic behaviours, with raising money for charities the most prevalent behaviour among the sample. Health donations or fund raising is the highest at 68%, and it is important to note that this survey also coincided with the social-media 'ice-bucket' challenge that raised over €2 million for the Irish Cancer Society. Participation in sponsored walks/runs/swims is also very prevalent among the sample at 50% raising money for charities within the past 12 months. Regular volunteering (30%) and community problem solving (23%) are significantly lower than those civic engagements that require a shorter commitment.

**Public Voice.** Political voice relates to obvious behaviours whereby citizens express themselves either politically or socially (Zurkin et al 2006). The highest form of political voice relates to political consumerism, boycotting (for

example, buy fair-trade goods) at 70%, followed by petition signing (online and offline) at 49%. Protesting, marching or being part of a demonstration, which can require a longer level of commitment or time than other political voice behaviours, was also relatively high at 41%. Just over a quarter (26%) of respondents claimed they have boycotted a product in the past 12 months for 'ethical, environmental or political reasons'. The more 'traditional' forms of political voice indicators, such as contacting a local or national politician (17%), TV/radio stations (13%) or Newspapers (10%) were considerably lower.

**Attentiveness.** In this section students were asked questions relating to whether they are interested in politics or follow politics, public or current affairs, and how often they would talk about politics. Among the sample, the students are 'not very interested' ( $M=3.15$ ,  $SD=1.049$ ) in politics and 'rarely' ( $M=2.80$ ,  $SD=.945$ ) follow politics. Furthermore, they only follow current events and the news 'some of the time' ( $M=2.09$ ,  $SD=.887$ ) and 'sometimes' ( $M=3.07$ ,  $SD=1.093$ ) talk about politics, news or current affairs.

**Lifestyle Politics.** According to Manning and Edwards (2013) young people express themselves politically through their daily lifestyle choices. The level of engagement in lifestyle political participation is high among the sample, with 69% purchasing organic foods', 70% specifically shopping locally', 88% having 'reduced their waste and recycle' while 36% 'carry an organ donor card' and 21% 'grow their own food'.

**Online Engagement.** In order to assess if the students were engaging in civic activities online, a series of questions were asked pertaining to their behaviour online. With 40% of respondents stating that they have posted/shared videos that 'highlighted an unjust situation' and 31% posted/shared videos 'attempting to garner support or donations for a cause' on social media. Furthermore, 21% of respondents 'posted comments about political or societal issues' and 60% of respondents have used the internet to read national or international news.

**Orientation towards Government.** Citizens are said to be more critical of authority and less trustful of governments than previous generations (Dalton 2008, Norris 2002). The study revealed mild agreement ( $M=3.5$ ,  $SD=1.143$ ) that 'politics and government are so complicated'. They are 'uncertain' ( $M=2.82$ ,  $SD=1.114$ ) that 'the only way to change anything in society is to get involved in politics' but do 'agree' ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=1.068$ ) that 'young people can have a real influence in politics if they are involved'. They also 'agree' ( $M=3.04$ ,  $SD=1.213$ ) that 'politics has a huge impact on a young person's daily life'. When it comes specifically to politicians, the students 'disagree' ( $M=2.21$ ,  $SD=1.006$ ) that 'in general, politicians can be trusted'. They are 'uncertain' ( $M=2.67$ ,  $SD=1.009$ ) whether 'most elected officials are concerned with serving their fellow citizens but they 'disagree' ( $M=2.39$ ,  $SD=.941$ ) that 'politicians are concerned with listening and addressing youth issues'

**Preliminary Qualitative Findings**

The second stage of this research project will entail semi-structured qualitative interviews with students in the same age category, and will aim to gather a more in-depth understanding of their perspectives, opinions and views on civic engagement. A pilot study was conducted with four students, three females (1 aged 23 and 2 aged 24) and one male (aged 23), all final year students at ITB. The preliminary results from this pilot study are outlined below;

**Low ‘Traditional’ Involvement.** Among all of the interviewees, there was a dearth of traditional electoral engagement, but each student cited engagement with voluntary organisations or charity events. The biggest reason for getting involved in voluntary work was “being asked”, followed by “wanting to gain new experiences”.

**Young People Outside of the Political Sphere.** When asked why they think young people do not get involved or are disengaging with traditional forms of engagement, the students cited multiple barriers towards youth engagement with traditional politics. The main reason each student gave was “politicians not reaching out to young people” and not “pulling them in”. The students also highlighted that there are a lack of young political representatives and that makes them feel ‘out of place’. The lack of young politicians and lack of politicians’ engagement with young people was viewed as a barrier to their engagement; it is portraying the message to young people that politics is essentially only for older people and does not concern them.

**Trust.** When asked if they ‘think politicians are trustworthy’ they mostly replied that while some might be trustworthy, they do not think the majority are trustworthy with one participant analogising their trust of politicians to doing the laundry stating, “I don’t really know to be honest. I’m a bit confused. I don’t know, like, trust them... what do I trust them to do? Like, trust them to do my laundry, yeah, maybe the colour wash, but not the whites!”.

**Youth Political Involvement.** When asked if they feel young people should be involved in politics, they all think young people should probably be more engaged, as what is happening now will affect them when they are older. They also felt that if more young people got involved, people would probably begin to take them seriously and it might, “mix things up a little”, “even things out” or “upset the rhythm” and bring about “a bit of change... move with the times”.

**Political Knowledge and Efficacy.** Among the sample there was an evident lack of knowledge about citizenship and what it is, or what political representatives actually do, and if they had a problem, they would be hesitant to approach them as they think they would be told that “it is not their area” or “they don’t deal with that”. They also said that keeping up with the news and current affairs is extremely hard, as the amount of things you need to know is daunting and “nine times out of ten, I don’t know what people are talking about”. They mention that they perceive only negative things or scandals and that this can “bring you down”, and when they hear things that they disagree

with, they “just tune out” because it gets very serious and they “don’t want to deal with that, it gets too much”.

### **Discussion**

It is clear from this research that young people have a low rate of participation with traditional civic engagement activities, such as voting, expressing their opinions and following politics and current affairs. In a study of young peoples’ civic engagement by Keeter et al (2002, p.194) the young participants openly admitted and were unapologetic about their political disinterest. Nonetheless, preliminary qualitative findings point towards a lack of knowledge of politics and the political system along with a low tolerance of dealing with conflicting and sometimes heated debates on difficult topics. An individual’s lack of confidence in their abilities or knowledge is a major deterrent for people who may avoid engaging in a majority of forms of civic behaviour, from political to social activities (Power Inquiry 2006 cited in Brodie, Hughes, Jochum, Miller, Ockenden, Warburton 2009, p.30).

However, while there is evidence that the students are not expressing their opinions in newspapers (10%) or on the radio or television (13%), they are expressing their public voice in other ways, such as boycotting products (26%), signing petitions (49%) and protesting (41%). There is also evidence of online forms of ‘public voice’, where students have shared or posted politically and socially motivated videos or campaigns on social media. Unfortunately, although they may be developing new and innovative forms of participation within the political sphere, their non-participation in traditional political processes has consequences (Levine, 2007, Zurkin et al, 2006, Galston and Lopez, 2006, Sherrod et al, 2002). If young people become disengaged from civil society, their potentially valuable contributions are missed and society loses out on their innovative ideas and creativity, energy and social networks (Sherrod et al 2002, p.10).

On the other hand, the preliminary qualitative pilot study is showing evidence that the reasons for this disengagement are not simple and clear cut, and certainly does not point towards ‘youth apathy’. The findings highlight that young people tend to perceive politics very negatively, believing that everything they hear pertains to a scandal or is bad news and they rarely hear anything good. According to Bennett (2002), young people have developed in an era where politics is heavily criticised and considered wrought with inauthentic untrustworthy politicians and corruption. They also stated that politicians do not reach out to young people and young representatives are missing from the political arena, and this does not go unnoticed. Bennett (2008) also highlights that political campaigners rarely appeal directly or genuinely to the younger generations on youth issues or concerns. A survey conducted by Charter 88 (cited in Howland and Bethell 2000, p.16) found that 91% of young people said that they would be more likely to participate in voting if politicians campaigned and addressed issues that were of importance to them. Howland and Bethell (2002, p.15) argue that the alleged political ‘apathy’ of young people “is actually a misnomer for a malaise that would be better understood as disempowerment from the formal mechanism through which politics is organised”.

There are many interrelated causes and effects which ultimately lead to a disconnection between government and young people. As Gerodimos (2010) states, an underlying question that emerges from the literature and research on youth civic engagement is whether or not the move away from traditional forms of civic engagement by young people is a symptom of a breakdown in the chain of the political and civic socialisation of young people in society. Manning and Edwards (2013, p.12) highlight that education should seek to nurture young people's preferences for more 'direct' and daily forms of civic engagement, while governments, politicians and policy should address the emerging barriers to political engagement that young people are highlighting.

### **Recommendations for the Technological University**

Although there is an evident divide and lack of consensus on the current status of youth civic engagement, there is agreement from all sides of the debate on the need to nurture civic engagement, and higher education institutes are expected to take the leading role (Ostrander 2004). There is a long tradition of linking the potential of higher education for increasing civic engagement for students and developing active citizens (Annette 2010, p.453). The following recommendations attempt to nurture the three separate but interconnected forms of civic engagement proposed by Berger (2009); political, social and moral engagement. A proposed space within the new Technological University for each of the three dimensions is outlined in order to nurture a fully rounded sense of civic engagement for students.

**Community Based Learning (Service Learning).** One specific approach to developing curricula that aims to develop the whole student is the introduction of meaningful work placements for all students, along with increasing opportunities for students to become further engaged during their time at the institution. The first recommendation of this paper, however, is for the Technological University to provide community-based learning (service learning) as an alternative to work placements for students across all departments. The National Strategy on Higher Education 2030 (DES 2011, p.61) while recognising that work placements are beneficial for students, promotes the use of service learning where possible within higher education as it provides more meaningful placements, where students gain experiential learning, reflection and civic responsibility. Community-based learning is an excellent experiential learning strategy for cultivating student's social and moral development and engagement. In acknowledging its role in the promotion of civic engagement, most higher education institutes view community-based learning as a feasible solution for increasing civic engagement among its students (Ostrander 2004, Prentice 2009). The Dublin Institute of Technology is already leading the way in community-based research, with over 900 students taking part in a project in the academic year 2013/2014 (DIT 2014). Furthermore, Campus Engage fully promotes the integration of community-based learning into higher education and provides a supportive role and a wealth of information for institutions working towards making this transition.



Jacoby (1996 cited in Welch 2009, p.174) defines service learning as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development”. Community-based learning contains a higher learning dimension with its added focus on partnerships, reflection and reciprocity, important learning components sometimes missing from work placements or volunteering activities (Welch 2009, p.174). The development of community-based learning also aligns to young people’s preferences for engagement, where they view ‘helping others’ as an important norm for ‘good citizenship’ and are already more inclined to be civically engaged, rather than politically engaged. Through community-based learning, “education becomes less about an individual’s comprehension of facts and more about an individual as part of a community that works together to solve challenges” (Blosser 2006, p.5).

**Ensuring an Ethical and Moral Component to Community-based Learning.** According to Berger (2009) moral engagement is a form of civic engagement that ‘waits in the wings’ and is a part of almost all political and social engagement. Moral engagement involves a higher dimension of presence; it involves ‘doing the right thing’ but also understanding and being committed to the reasoning behind, and justification for these actions (Berger 2009, p.44). Blosser (2006) also highlights that the ethical reasoning aspect of community-based learning is often overlooked. The ethical and moral development of students on community-based learning, then, is an important aspect of students overall civic development not to be ignored. Therefore, it is recommended that part of the assessment of students on a community-based learning project or placement should not only be a written reflective piece, but contain an additional ethical and moral reasoning component. With respect to ethics and community based learning, Blosser (2006, p.9) aptly asks: How will students’ prejudices affect their ability to relate to others? Will students have their stereotypes reinforced? Will students adopt a saviour mentality or leave with a feeling of disconnection from the actual service they have provided? It is easier to discuss issues such as good citizenship in the classroom than participate in difficult self-reflection. However, a politic needs citizens who have an understanding of themselves and their interpersonal relationships. The reflective elements of students’ community-based assessment should not only be a reflective entry on their experience within the placement but should demonstrate self-knowledge and introspection.

**The Democracy Plaza and Civic Engagement.** The third recommendation pertains to nurturing the political engagement dimension of civic engagement, specifically in relation to the development of the skills necessary for political efficacy, such as expressing opinions, engaging in contested debates and being attentive to local, national and global issues (McTighe Musil 2009). Preliminary qualitative findings of this study and others (Howland and Bethell 2000) find that young people view the political system as complicated and hostile, “*turning off*” when they don’t agree with others opinions. Nonetheless, “there is an emerging consensus that in the twenty-first century sociality will be as central to student success as literacy and analytical skills... in the future, individuals will be expected and often required to address collective

problems by pursuing collaborative initiatives within the context of increasingly diverse communities” (Spiezio 2009, p.86). In order for students to engage effectively in a democratic society, students need to learn, as part of their education, the knowledge, abilities, and morals necessary to participate as engaged, democratic citizens. ‘Civic engagement can only come about with the development of a capacity for engagement. That development is what constitutes “civic learning”’ (Saltmarsh 2005, p.50).

One realistic recommendation to promote civic engagement and provide students with real opportunities to increase their ‘public voice’ is the development of a public sphere or space within the college campus. One example of this is the Democracy Plaza (Goldfinger 2009). In the campus of Indiana University-Purdue University (IUPUI) the Democracy Plaza “is an outdoor structure that consists of a set of chalkboard panels arranged to form an open-ended rectangle. Its interior is used to host events” (Goldfinger 2009, p.77). A Democracy plaza gives people two basic ways to communicate and become informed. First, the Plaza’s chalkboards facilitate written communication and discussion by allowing people write their thoughts and read the comments of others. Second, the plaza offers opportunities for spoken interactions and deliberation by holding events such as forums, debates, and presentations within its physical confines. This would be an excellent facility to be used as part of continuous assessments and the development of skills in many facets of active citizenship and civic engagement (Jacoby 2009, Prentice 2011). This could also potentially become a medium to reconnect young people to politics, by inviting public representatives and available officials to come to the plaza to speak directly to the students about youth issues, or to address youth concerns.

## **Conclusion**

Preliminary results from this research provide evidence of low student engagement with traditional forms of civic engagement, while concurrently the results are indicating signs of political and civic expression in more lifestyle orientated politics. Preliminary qualitative results highlight many barriers affecting youth engagement with the political sphere, demonstrating a possible sign of a broken link between young people, the political system and its representatives. At this historic juncture, with the establishment of the new Technological University for Dublin, is the opportunity for the development of a new educational landscape, one that considers civic engagement the third pillar of the educational model and of equal importance to teaching and research. As Goddard (2009, p.4) asserts, in response to the current challenges, it is now crucial that higher education institutions introduce an institution-wide strategy for the promotion of civic engagement. This paper has recommended three such possible strategies, out of many, towards moving the higher education civic engagement agenda from an ad-hoc position to being a prominent part of our new campus culture. As Delanty (2000 cited in Goddard 2009, p.9) argues “the great significance of the university is that it can be the most important site of connectivity in the knowledge society (and) a key institution for the formation of cultural and technological citizenship (and for) reversing the decline of the public sphere”.

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